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## *American Families: Past and Present.* Susan M. Ross, Editor.

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position to donate, and their interests are therefore not considered. Behan asserts that there is a need for a class-based political party representing the voice of working class Americans, who are disproportionately uninsured. Other nations have an active political party representing Labor, which has traditionally been the party that advances the national health insurance agenda. Labor in the United States, on the other hand, has relied primarily on the Democratic Party, which also has traditionally represented southern White elites, who have frequently been opposed to national health insurance.

*Solving the Health Care Problem* uses a systematic analysis to compare three nations, demonstrating that lack of national health insurance in the United States is far from simple or straightforward. Behan's book offers no suggestions for how to provide insurance to more Americans quickly, but instead points to major system changes as necessary for change; for national health insurance to become a reality, there must be either significant Labor party power or a lack of veto points, meaning there must be a reduced number of places where proposed legislation can be defeated. Currently, the United States does not satisfy either of these conditions so the likely successful approach to provide health insurance to more Americans will depend on expansion of existing programs.

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Susan M. Ross (Ed.), *American Families: Past and Present*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. \$25.95 papercover.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen profound changes in the American family, generating considerable anxiety about the future of society. Expert and public opinion has vacillated between viewing such changes as completely disastrous or relatively benign. Social science evidence has been invoked on all sides, yet many questions stand unanswered and the debate remains largely ideological in tone. Students of family sociology and policy will appreciate the interdisciplinary and

historically informed approach to the analysis of modern day family issues offered by *American Families: Past and Present*. This collection reminds us that understanding contemporary families requires sophisticated and multifaceted methodologies that take into account the socially constructed meanings of "family" over time, as well as acknowledge the enduring diversity of family structures and experiences.

Part I, "Family Transformations in Social-Historical Perspective," establishes the framework for analyzing notions of family. A variety of relevant topics are examined, including the changing nature of fatherhood, the "invention" of adolescence and the pathologizing of teenage pregnancy, the emergence of grandparenthood, women's control of their own fertility, the evolution of courtship rituals, and the idealization and commercialization of family celebrations. Real changes in family demographics are reviewed while the historical reality of family diversity is emphasized. Part II, "The Interplay of Social Institutions with Family Formations," takes a look at the bigger picture, focusing on the influence of legal, economic, governmental, and technological factors on families throughout American history. Contemporary concerns such as same-sex marriage, family leave, and child care are also addressed. Each reading is prefaced by an introduction by the editor and followed by suggested questions for classroom discussion.

Ross' anthology brings together some of the most interesting, seminal work from prominent thinkers in the field. These are the kinds of articles that truly open students' eyes to critical perspectives they may not before have encountered. Part I is particularly strong and just plain fun to read—this is American family "myth busting" at its finest. Part II also contains a number of compelling readings but feels a little less coherent than Part I. For example, although the influences of various social institutions such as the law, medicine and science, and war on family life are all fascinating topics in their own right, the rationale for grouping them together is not immediately apparent. Likewise, the last section on social policy seems somewhat disconnected from the rest of the collection. Although the readings themselves are notable selections from the literature on family policy, it is unclear how they are related to the material presented in Part I. Of course, identifying

thematic linkages and coming up with meaningful groupings is a particular challenge for the interdisciplinary scholar. Perhaps the chapter introductions and discussion questions could have been better utilized to highlight such interconnections. Despite this weakness, the material presented in *American Families: Past and Present* represents a valuable resource and would be quite useful in the classroom setting—as well as genuinely enjoyed by students.

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